Where We Live: Old Town Kensington in Maryland's Montgomery County

By Tracey Longo Special to The Washington Post Saturday, June 5, 2010

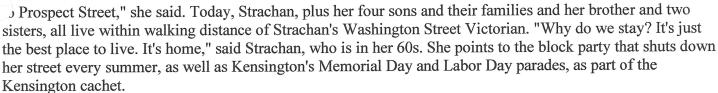
The 55,000 drivers who whiz through Kensington along Connecticut Avenue each day catch only a glimpse of the city's Old Town. They miss the historic richness of the Victorian and American Gothic architecture; the

storybook gardens; the nine parks; and the antique shops, bookstores and cafes that make up the bustling town center.

But it is the bounty of Old Town's turn-of-the-century community charm and the walking distance it offers to amenities such as grocery stores, restaurants, shopping, libraries, gyms and a post office that keeps many of its residents here for decades, sometimes life.

Mary Strachan, who lives on Washington Street with her husband, Rich, is one of the lifers.

In fact, Strachan is one of six generations of her family to reside in Kensington. "My great-grandfather on my mother's side came here after the Civil War and moved





In the 1750s, Daniel Carroll II, a framer of the Constitution and the surveyor of the District of Columbia's boundaries, inherited the land that became Kensington. In 1890, D.C. developer Brainard Warner purchased the area that makes up Old Town to create a Victorian garden suburb designed after the one he had recently visited in Kensington, England. With Warner's sway, the town was incorporated as Kensington in 1894.

His planned town, complete with building lots, a church, a library and a newspaper, attracted moneyed friends and city dwellers, who bought parcels of land along his carefully designed curvilinear streets. Today, the town of half a square mile has a population of 1,900, while the surrounding Zip code that shares its name is home to about 18,000 residents. The town boasts Montgomery County's oldest library and its second-oldest railroad station, where commuters wait each morning for the MARC train that runs to Union Station.

**Censington's master plan, which governs its commercial zoning and development, is under review by **Montgomery County. Similar master plans have been used to revitalize the city centers of Bethesda, Silver Spring and Wheaton in the past 15 years.

"We want to bring the town into the 21st century while respecting its history," said Kensington Mayor Peter Fosselman, who is an urban planner by education and trade. "The biggest thing we'll achieve with our master plan is mixed-use zoning, which allows residential, retail and offices to be located on the same property. We rant to see even more green space and enhanced pedestrian streets and paths to create a magnet at the center of town."

Old Town was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1980. An Urban Land Institute study that Kensington commissioned in 2008 found that the town has "some of the most beautiful wooded streets and historic homes in . . . the D.C. metropolitan area . . . but with its primary shopping and Victorian neighborhood charm hidden by aging storefronts and gas stations, the town has become less of a destination and more of a pass-through community."

Fosselman, a co-owner of several Old Town businesses, said, "We don't want 15-story buildings, but we do want to create a place where people can live, work and recreate without having to travel elsewhere."

"I love the Victorian architecture and the houses, which are so well-crafted," said George Myers, the award-winning architect behind GTM Architects, who bought and refurbished his own home in Old Town about eight years ago. "But I am in favor of the master plan. Every community needs to understand that they need more density and that includes housing and commercial development.

Myers and his wife, Janine, are raising four children in the neighborhood. "While we stay in Kensington for some things, we also drive to Bethesda to eat out and for entertainment. I'd like to see a few more restaurants and a little more variety right here in town," Myers said.

"It's a really exciting time to be in Kensington," said Alana Aschenbach, who lives in Old Town and is an agent with Flaherty Group Realty. "I think people forget how much we already have here. I think it helps Kensington omes maintain their value a little better than other communities in Montgomery County, especially when you think about what's yet to come in terms of development."

Jenny and Doug Smith bought their sprawling yellow Victorian on St. Paul Street 17 years ago, raising four children in the community. "I just like the small town feel," Jenny Smith said. "It's a place where people know their neighbors. We have regular get-togethers every week after our kids' soccer games." Rather than move when they ran out of space, they worked with Myers to expand their home to include a bigger kitchen, a new master bedroom and porches.

"We're right across the street from St. Paul Park on a half-acre, down the street from shopping, the train station and the farmers market. What's not to love?" Jenny Smith said.

That "love it, don't leave it" mentality also drove Carl Mahany and his wife, Laura Pillette, to stay in their American Gothic through the births of their two sets of twins and several major home renovations. "I had driven through the neighborhood as a kid and, years later, was excited I could afford a very run-down house," Mahany said with a laugh. His business, Macon Construction, is located in Old Town.

With the help of architect Thomas Manion, Mahany added about 3,000 square feet to the home's original 2,500. Together they won a Montgomery County historic preservation award for renovating the home, which dates from the early 1900s.

Tosselman says he is seeing more bustle on the streets and at the all-year farmers market. New shops in Old Town include Flotsam & Jetsam Antiques, with its colorful displays of jewelry, furniture and garden supplies. Kic Thrift Boutique, which sells vintage clothes and jewelry, moved in down the street on Connecticut Avenue. "I knew this was the right place for my store from the moment I walked in and saw the Tiffany-blue paint and

all the original moldings," said Kic owner Lamara Toro. "I really think we're opening eyes to the value of great finds here in Kensington."